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EVIDENCE REPORT

No 188

Addressing and Mitigating Violence

Beyond Borders: The End of the Mano River War(s)?

Jeremy Allouche, Matthew Benson and Freida M'Cormack

April 2016

The IDS programme on Strengthening Evidence-based Policy works across seven key themes. Each theme works with partner institutions to co-construct policy-relevant knowledge and engage in policy-influencing processes. This material has been developed under the Addressing and Mitigating Violence theme.

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BEYOND BORDERS: THE END OF THE MANO RIVER WAR(S)?

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Abbreviations

AFL	Armed Forces of Liberia
CDF	Civil Defense Forces (Sierra Leone)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DDR	disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FN	Forces Nouvelles
FPI	Front Populaire Ivoirien
ICG	International Crisis Group
LURD	Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy
MNJTf	Multinational Joint Task Force
MODEL	Movement for Democracy in Liberia
MPIGO	Mouvement Populaire Ivoirien du Grand Ouest
MRB	Mano River Basin
MRU	Mano River Union
NCDDRR	National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (Liberia)
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PBC	Peacebuilding Commission (United Nations)
PBF	Peacebuilding Fund (United Nations)
RUF	Revolutionary United Front (Sierra Leone)
ULIMO	United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy
UNAMSIL	United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone
UNIPSIL	United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone
UNMIL	United Nations Mission in Liberia
UNOCI	United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
US	United States

1 Introduction

The Mano River sub-region, which includes Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire, has experienced decades of violent upheavals and political instability. This notably includes civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire (Allouche and Mohammed 2014; Ellis 2001; McGovern 2011; Mitton 2015; Richards 1998). While these have generally been analysed as a series of discrete wars, some specialists have interpreted them as part of a regional conflict system; indeed, the World Bank has referred to a 'Mano River Basin conflict system' (Marc, Verjee and Mogaka 2015). Regional conflict systems can be defined as a 'geographically determined area of insecurity, characterised by interdependent violent conflicts with a plurality of different sub-state, national or transnational actors' (Ansorg 2011: 175).

There have been many analyses of regional conflict systems in other parts of the world (Fearon 1998 for the Balkans; Rubin, Armstrong, and Ntegeye 2001 for the Great Lakes region). Several of these regional conflict studies highlight commonalities, including: the prominence of transnational political, economic, military and social networks (Pugh, Cooper and Goodhand 2003); private entrepreneurs of violence (Salehyan 2007); transborder kinship of identity groups (Fearon 1998); and massive refugee flows (Manahl 2000; Prunier 2009). Another commonality throughout these analyses is that private, local and transnational actors play a more important role in this type of conflict than in 'traditional' intra- and inter-state conflict. This Evidence Report aims to identify the ways in which militant violence diffuses in the Mano River region and to establish the conditions that characterise it as a regional conflict system.

Danny Hoffman (2011) coined the term 'Mano River War' as an umbrella term for the 15-year period of violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Hoffman's timeframe begins with the 1989 invasion of Liberia by Charles Taylor and ends with his eventual resignation from the Liberian presidency in 2003. In this regard, the Sierra Leone civil war is just an extension of the Liberian conflict (Gershoni 1997). A number of events support this theory. The first is that the conflict started with an invasion from Liberia of the Kailahun district in the remote east of Sierra Leone on 23 March 1991 by Revolutionary United Front (RUF) forces. Second, RUF forces at this point included many Liberians. Third, the RUF's main opponent initially was the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO), which was composed of exiled Liberians. Hoffman (2011) limited his analysis to the period 1989 to 2003 but the military events happening in Côte d'Ivoire could also be seen as an extension of the war. Côte d'Ivoire's conflict, which briefly ended in 2007, later resumed with the 2010–11 post-electoral crisis, which was in part perpetrated by re-mobilised Liberian fighters. In fact, the 1989 war in Liberia was launched from Côte d'Ivoire, where Charles Taylor was based and started his invasion.

The Mano River War concept usefully captures the interconnectivity of the peoples and countries in the Mano River Basin (MRB) and details how the Liberian, Sierra Leonean and Ivoirian civil wars relate. The notion might also reflect something of a conflict-prone regional and transnational malaise (see a special issue of *Politique Africaine* in 2002). Despite the cessation of large-scale conflict in the region, there is nevertheless still some debate as to whether the Mano River War really has concluded. So while Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire have not experienced war in the past five years, one wonders whether this marks the end of the Mano River War.

This multifaceted interpretation of the Mano River Basin's (MRB's) dynamics complicates our understanding of conflicts in the region and in neighbouring countries. Indeed, these wars are frequently neatly divided, with wide variation in estimates of each conflict's severity (see Table 1.1). However, given the interconnectivity of the peoples and countries in the

Mano River Union (MRU),¹ how useful are these distinctions? Moreover, could the intertwining political and economic dimensions of the conflicts lead us to consider whether they may actually be perceived as a single conflict or, more precisely, a series of interwoven conflicts that cannot or should not be separated from one another? Alternatively, for some, the conflicts in this region might actually be the result of a ‘joint criminal enterprise’ as labelled by David Crane, Special Court for Sierra Leone Prosecutor (perhaps even more so than its East African counterpart – see De Waal 2015).

Table 1.1 Wars in Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone

Name of conflict	Country	Years	Nature of conflict	Fatalities (estimates)
First Liberian Civil War	Liberia	1989–1996	Civil war	100,000–220,000
Sierra Leone Civil War	Sierra Leone	1991–2002	Civil war	50,000–300,000
Second Liberian Civil War	Liberia	1999–2003	Civil war	150,000–300,000
First Ivoirian Civil War	Côte d’Ivoire	2002–2007	Civil war	3,000
Second Ivoirian Civil War	Côte d’Ivoire	2010–2011	Civil war	3,000

Source: Marc *et al.* (2015: 5).

The aim of this report is to consider the extent to which we can conclude that the Mano River War has indeed ended, and to reflect on the legacies, imaginaries and trajectories of this particular space over the past 25 years. This report will therefore discuss the concept of a Mano River War through a series of questions. Should the concept use the singular or plural form? To what extent is the idea of a conflict system relevant to understanding the evolution of various armed conflicts in the region? What else might it contribute to a deeper understanding of the region that could promote more sustained peace and security? And have we now come to an end of the Mano River War, especially given successive cycles of peaceful post-conflict elections including, significantly, in Côte d’Ivoire in 2015?

This Evidence Report is divided into three sections: Section 2 explores historical perspectives that might contribute to political and conflict dynamics in the region. Section 3 explores the legitimacy of the Mano River War concept, and analyses what terms such as ‘war’, ‘roaming combatants’, ‘individuals’, ‘networks’ and ‘strongmen’ might mean in the context of the MRB. Section 4 identifies and reviews policy perspectives and approaches to the region. The report expands many of the research findings that were initially introduced during a workshop held at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) between 30 June and 1 July 2015.

¹ The Mano River Union (MRU) was established in 1973 between Liberia and Sierra Leone, with Guinea joining in 1980 and Côte d’Ivoire in 2008. It is named after the Mano River, which begins in Guinea and forms part of the border between Liberia and Sierra Leone.

2 Historical perspectives on the region

While there are several key historical texts on Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the historiography specific to the MRB is limited. The dearth of historical research on the MRB might come from a general focus on the study of political dynamics at the centre (the political capitals) of each of these countries rather than at their borderlands, which includes the Mano River.

In addition, rather than start with pre-colonial dynamics, most historical research takes Western colonisation of the region as its starting point. This is despite evidence which suggests there were complex political associations along many of these countries' borders (including what is now the MRB) prior to European colonisation (Clapham 1976: 8). For instance, the Fula (or Fulani) people who are also in MRB countries have settled throughout numerous countries across West Africa, from Guinea through to Cameroon in Central Africa, and even as far as Sudan. This is in part due to pastoralist nomadic livelihoods and to pre-colonial empire building. Mandingo (or Malinke) peoples are similarly widespread across West Africa, and their pre-colonial dispersion was facilitated by merchant networks as they spread along trade routes, as well as by conflict with other ethnic groups and the search for agricultural land (Adebayo 1997).

2.1 Authority in historical perspective

Interestingly, the literature's focus on the centre probably reveals the different trajectories of the three colonising countries (France for Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea, the United Kingdom (UK) for Sierra Leone and the United States (US) for Liberia). This in turn might have contributed to very limited knowledge about the region beyond its national borders.

For example, colonial oversight of the so-called 'hinterland' regions in most MRB countries was tenuous at best, relegated to preserving the frontiers of the colony. This is in part the consequence of the underlying motivations for colonising these territories. For example, British colonisation of Sierra Leone was initially driven by an interest in maintaining a naval base for fighting the slave trade. Freed slaves from other British colonies who migrated to Sierra Leone subsequently shaped public authority in the country. The US had a comparatively small interest in Liberia, which was mostly limited to its complicated relationship with slavery on its own shores before the American civil war. This explains why the US restricted its engagement with Liberia to a US-supervised private venture in which settlers quickly had to declare themselves a sovereign state to protect access to foreign commerce. Similar to Sierra Leone, former slaves who repatriated from the US to Liberia subsequently shifted power relations in the country (Clapham 1976: 7). Meanwhile, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea were first maintained as small trading outposts for the French, which they could also use to expand deeper into the continent (Young 1994: 80).

In the MRB, as in most of West Africa and indeed much of Africa, the arbitrary demarcation of territory during the colonial period from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s resulted in the division of ethnic groups between two or more countries (Hargreaves 1974; Hopkins 2014). During the colonial period, this was somewhat mitigated as some countries (such as Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso) were administered as single units, and labour migration was encouraged.

Policies to generate revenues from the territories also shaped how public authority was experienced by people during, and arguably following, colonial rule. In Burkina Faso, the colonial administration introduced head taxes, which pushed some people to migrate elsewhere or to try their best to 'disappear' from the aegis of the state (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1977). This dynamic contributed to Burkinabè migrating to contemporary Côte d'Ivoire and

Ghana, and might have helped nurture a purposefully malleable identity among communities in the region that continues today. All this was further complicated by international movements of returning slaves, which expanded connections across the region and helped construct complex ethnic, national and regional identities.

The decision by newly independent governments to maintain colonial borders resulted in artificial boundaries and the fracture of numerous kinship groups into different countries. Individual governments in the region continue to strive for a conceptualisation of the nation state that conforms to the Western model – including well-defined, exclusionary borders. Yet they do so against the reality of extremely porous, poorly patrolled frontiers, and enduring family relations and ethnic loyalties that straddle multiple international borders, which are contested in some cases (Allouche and Mohammed 2014). This has been highlighted most recently by the Ebola epidemic, which demonstrated the significant cross-border flows of people and resources that continues, despite stronger articulations of the nation state across the three affected countries.

Like the colonising powers before them, contemporary West African governments have tended to concentrate their governance and development efforts in political, economic and regional capitals. This has arguably come at the expense of the so-called ‘periphery’, most especially the difficult-to-reach border regions, which are sometimes more easily accessible via neighbouring countries’ territories. The state’s presence is largely manifested in the form of externally imposed local administrative authorities (such as the *préfets* in Guinea and Côte d’Ivoire), and exploitative border control officials, leaving border inhabitants distrustful of the state.²

Differing colonial administration systems also had distinctive effects on how peripheries are understood and subsequently engaged by countries in the MRB today. For example, French colonisation of Côte d’Ivoire arguably resulted in more direct forms of governance than in countries colonised by the British, which relied on a system of indirect rule. MacLean (2010: 116) uses the example of the distinctions between how Côte d’Ivoire and neighbouring Ghana decentralised in the 1970s and 1980s as evidence that the legacy of European colonisation in the region still lingers. Ghana’s decentralisation efforts spread to the district and, at times, the village level during this time. In comparison, decision making in Côte d’Ivoire was rarely granted to local authorities and remained with central government. This, MacLean suggests, is significant because it resulted in Ivoirian citizens having different expectations of the state compared with citizens in neighbouring Ghana, which was colonised by the British.

Chauveau and Richards (2008) argue that disputes over land also have strong colonial origins that have deeply etched the nature of conflict in the region. They also note that violence in Côte d’Ivoire from 2002 to 2007 was directed at outsiders, as the state was comparatively centralised and benefited those who were already associated with the state. This differs from eastern Sierra Leone, where decentralised local leaders and community institutions were targets of violence (2008: 516).

Crook *et al.* (2007) provide another, related example of the crisis of ‘traditional’ and customary land ownership systems in the MRB, which might also be driving the conflict. In Ghana, land rights continue to be regulated by customary law, and they have been incorporated into the legal system for some time (akin to the situation in Nigeria and Sierra Leone). In contrast, customary rights have never been formally recognised in Côte d’Ivoire. This has shaped the extent to which indigenous societies have succeeded in controlling their land, with more fruitful efforts in Sierra Leone than in Côte d’Ivoire, where local societies are weaker. Land ownership has since become a more violent issue in Côte d’Ivoire than in

² James Fairhead’s contribution at the workshop.

other countries in the MRB, following a number of ‘invented’ claims to customary land that were made in the 1970s and 1980s (Crook *et al.* 2007). This also raises critical questions about the role of tribes and chieftaincies as a means of legitimate authority.

Overall, one can see how European colonisation continues to shape the politics of countries in the MRB region and helps to explain the interdependencies and interconnectedness between them. These include transnational kinships, the legacies of different state-formation efforts, and tensions around land ownership. The distrust in the central post-colonial state in the MRB was starkly manifested recently by the violent opposition to authorities’ messaging in Guinea’s border regions during the recent Ebola outbreak. The regions of Guinea that tended to resist the central government’s Ebola eradication efforts were also those that hold an inherent mistrust of the central government and also host natural resource wealth.³ The same applies to parts of northern Sierra Leone (especially Kambia district), where it proved hardest to eradicate the disease because of wariness towards the state.⁴ Mining communities, and particularly parts of the country where there is bauxite, were especially suspicious, owing to a perception that the state is there to ‘steal’ the region’s resources (Allouche 2015). Indeed, negative perceptions of civil servants from the capital were expanded to include the US and China, who were thought by some to have ‘invented’ Ebola in an act of sorcery in order to access the region’s resources (Bolten 2014).⁵

2.2 Identity in contemporary perspective

Given the MRB’s tiered pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history, identity claims in the region are slippery. Citizens of these countries who reside on the border may hold an identity that is independent of, or even in opposition to, their respective states. There is also a long-standing perception that individuals in the MRB feel as though they do not belong and are both marginalised and stigmatised.⁶ Moreover, a Mano River identity may exist across a group of people who share similarities but may not be bound to an elite or individual state. The factors potentially reinforcing this bond might include the inherent transnationalism of the people who inhabit the territory, which includes the fishing, forestry and mining communities. Ultimately, the state might also be something that people at the margins have consciously tried to evade, both by adopting relatively ‘mobile’ livelihoods and by embracing identities that diverge from national identities (Scott 2008).

Of course, some state policies have also furthered transnationalism, and not just of contiguous ethnic groups. The creation of the MRU encouraged its citizens to consider their countries as a common economic unit. All four countries’ participation in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) commits them to the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment (1979), which, although imperfectly implemented, aims to create a borderless region in the sub-region, with a common community citizenship of equal rights. Specifically, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, president of Côte d’Ivoire from independence in 1960 until his death in 1993, pursued economic development based on a plantation agriculture system that attracted hundreds of thousands of labourers from neighbouring countries; at the time, an estimated 26 per cent of the population was of foreign origin. According to the 1998 census, an estimated 2.24 million Burkina Faso nationals resided in Côte d’Ivoire (International Crisis Group 2011).

³ James Fairhead’s contribution at the workshop.

⁴ Lisa Denney’s contribution at the workshop.

⁵ Other myths claim it was invented by the Americans and British to justify regaining a military presence in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

⁶ Janet Mohammed’s contribution at the workshop.

Beyond historic and ethnic linkages, there is also some evidence for the 'transnationalisation' of ideas in the sub-region. The immediate post-colonial period coincided with other intellectual and political events in Africa that continue to shape ideas of the nation in the MRB. There was a purge of political thinkers in Sierra Leone shortly after independence, which led to a shift in how power was exercised, which was then characterised by more violent and extractive methods of control.⁷ This may have also coincided with the emergence of transnational ideas of the state that were initially prevalent in the MRB given the region's shared colonial history. For example, efforts to subvert or consciously evade the state may have been connected to the Pan-African movement, which was widely prevalent at this time (Esedebe 1994). As an ideology, Pan-Africanism challenged the idea that states, borders, territories and maps were physical entities.

One version of these anti-Western Pan-Africanist revolutionary ideas was championed by Colonel Gaddafi of Libya and Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso, who were both early sponsors of the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Compaoré introduced Taylor to Gaddafi, and he reportedly met Sankoh while they were both receiving military (insurgency) training, together with dozens of would-be insurgents not only from Liberia and Sierra Leone but also from other countries in Asia and Latin America as well (Ellis 2001).

Ex-colonial powers also shape the politics of the region in subtle ways. For example, Chauveau and Richards (2008) suggest that Western-dominated development policy towards the region continues to embrace a discourse that adopts a language of 'state-failure' (for Sierra Leone, for example, see Denney 2014: chapter 1). They regard this state-centric view as problematic because 'community failure' is also part of the conflict, especially around land ownership disputes and traditional models of authority. This omission is deleterious as it risks pitting an 'allegedly over-weaning state' against a 'mythically cohesive community'. It might overlook the ways in which land and other natural resources can become drivers of the conflict that involve, and partly intertwine with, the states and societies of the countries in the region (2008: 546–47).

In sum, from a historical perspective, attempts to neatly divide the conflict in the three countries (Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone) into recent timeframes – while understandable – might also be analytically misleading. This is because doing so arguably fails to take into account the possible pre-colonial, colonial and independence origins of the MRB conflict and, in turn, the available approaches towards addressing it.

⁷ Zoe Marks' contribution at the workshop.

3 Conceptualising a Mano River War

As emphasised in the introduction, although Hoffman coined the Mano River War concept, other political analysts have also raised the regional dimensions and linkages between the different civil wars in the region. The World Bank has advocated for the necessity of thinking beyond the traditional state-centric perspective. This position is strongly echoed in the Bank's 2011 *World Development Report*, which was themed 'Conflict, Security, and Development'. Its analysis is strongly linked to the idea of resilience, external stresses and conflict systems. It distinguishes various conflict systems within West Africa, arguing that the MRB conflict system has been the most destabilising (Marc *et al.* 2015: 16).

The key explanation therefore is that all these countries share similar structural weakness and that 'the political entrepreneurship of Charles Taylor lit the match of a region-wide conflict system in the Mano River subregion in 1989 after he and his lumpen forces launched the civil war in Liberia from inside Côte d'Ivoire' (Marc *et al.* 2015: 20). In the Bank's view, other civil wars in the region are the consequence of a domino effect. The common structural weaknesses across all the countries were: personalised and predatory governance systems; common grievances; and economic crises. Furthermore, porous borders, refugee flows, and the existence of cross-border communities and combatants have also contributed to instability and the spillover of conflict across the region.

The United Nations also seems to perceive the conflicts as interrelated, as demonstrated in Security Council Resolutions on the respective mandates of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone/United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL/UNIPSIL), the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI). Resolution 1509 (2003) establishing UNMIL noted that 'lasting stability in Liberia will depend on peace in the sub-region', and emphasised 'the importance of cooperation among the countries of the sub-region to this end, as well as the need for coordination of United Nations efforts to contribute to the consolidation of peace and security in the sub-region' (United Nations 2003). Successive Security Council Resolutions for both UNMIL and UNOCI have continued to call upon the missions, the respective governments, sub-regional organisations and UN agencies to collaborate with one another across borders to ensure lasting peace and security.

Nonetheless, the mechanisms for explaining the diffusion of the conflict are very broad and do not specifically explain the linkages and trajectories across these wars. Musah (2009: 49), for instance, considers that conflicts in any state in West Africa have affected neighbouring countries, all due to the complexity and depth of the demographic, political, economic and cultural ties between countries. On the other hand, Francis (2009: 91) emphasises 'peace spoilers', who are diverse actors who exploit war economies to their benefit and in turn have an interest in perpetuating war.

Others point to the proliferation of small arms, illegal trafficking and smuggling, and the porous nature of West Africa's borders (Piccolino and Minou 2014: 4–5; Keili 2008: 5–12). For instance, the smuggling of otherwise legal goods such as diamonds (Sierra Leone) or cocoa (Côte d'Ivoire) can contribute to the regionalisation of conflicts by favouring the development of war economies, which sustain violent conflicts and create vested incentives for actors to perpetuate them.

The practical absence of state power in border areas may indeed be a real concern. For instance, Liberia has an estimated 131 unofficial border crossing points. Of the 45 or so official ones, many are unmanned (Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization 2015). Throughout the country, there are 4,000 police officers (Search for Common Ground 2011), mostly concentrated in the capital. This different configuration of power can include entire

districts in which formal and informal trade and security networks implicitly govern the area. Perniciously, in recent years, transborder crime and banditry have increased in this already impoverished region, including illicit flows of weapons and drugs. Precise estimates are difficult to obtain (by their very nature), but the US Ambassador to Burkina Faso, Jeanine Jackson, has stated that there are more than 8 million light arms circulating in this part of the continent (IRIN Africa 2007).

In this section, we will look at the Mano River War concept through four key lenses: the idea of regional warriors; networks, leaders and regional politics; a crisis of youth; and the impact of transborder refugees.

3.1 ‘The regional warriors’

Discourse on regional combatants has received notable attention (see, for example, Misol 2004) and is clearly linked to the Mano River War. When the International Crisis Group (ICG) met the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) fighters,⁸ those fighters considered their actions in Liberia and Côte d’Ivoire as part of the same war. As emphasised in the first section, for some people, the border barely exists, as they are used to visiting relatives on the other side of the river since their childhood. The ICG’s Rinaldo Depagne also affirms that this idea is shared by the local authorities, who close their eyes to hidden passages in the forest that allow people to cross the borders without being checked.

The MRB’s interconnectedness extends to combatant and ex-combatant identity claims. For example, Hoffman (2011) explains that there is a small group of transnational fighters who have benefited from the flow of weapons and the (often illicit) transborder trade of natural resources in the region, including gold, diamonds, timber and cocoa. These ‘sliding combatants’ are comprised of a melange of citizens from the region and an array of local anti-insurgent forces that not only fought in both the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars but also switched sides during the same conflict (Aning and Atta-Asamoah 2011).

A military intelligence expert described the regional warriors as follows:

These guys form part of a regional militia I call the insurgent diaspora. They float in and out of wars and operate as they wish. They have no one to tell them where, when and how to behave. They’ve been incorporated into militias and armies all over the place – Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire – and are really the most dangerous tool that any government or rebel army can have.
(quoted in Human Rights Watch 2005: 13)

These regional warriors (from Burkina Faso, Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Guinea and Sierra Leone) participated in the 1991–2002 Sierra Leonean armed conflict, the 2000–01 cross-border attacks on Guinea from Liberia and Sierra Leone, the 1999–2003 Liberian armed conflict, the 2002–03 armed conflict, and the 2011 post-electoral crisis in Côte d’Ivoire. Some of them were trained originally in Libya in the late 1990s. The connection between the groups and wars is multifaceted: Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) incorporated Sierra Leonean Civil Defense Forces (CDF or Kamajors); Taylor used RUF fighters; MPIGO (Mouvement Populaire Ivoirien du Grand Ouest) – one of the two movements active in western Côte d’Ivoire when the rebellion started – was composed of Ivoirians loyal to General Robert Gueï but also included Sierra Leonean and Liberian nationals, while Laurent Gbagbo also used Liberians, mostly from the Krahn ethnic group.

⁸ A rebel group that was established in 2001 in opposition to Charles Taylor’s government.

The number of these regional combatants in each of these conflicts is usually estimated at more than 1,000, although these estimates should be taken with great caution. For example, the statistics given by the Liberian National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (NCDDRR) indicated that there were 612 disarmed expatriate combatants out of a total of more than 103,019. However, interviews by Human Rights Watch with ex-combatants revealed that many Sierra Leoneans said they had registered in the NCDDRR programme as a Liberian, usually for fear of being denied access to its benefits (Human Rights Watch 2005). The numbers may not be the most straightforward way to evaluate these connections. Indeed, the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process reflects all those involved but does not distinguish those involved at the onset from those forcibly abducted during the war.

One of the key questions is about whether these regional combatants were the leading force in driving and connecting these different wars. When fighting abroad, the regional warriors universally referred to themselves as being a member of the 'Special Forces'. In the words of one regional warrior:

Special Forces were the vanguard, the arrowhead, the strongest, those who had been trained outside, those who could play a pivotal role. We were called Special Forces from the first time when NPFL [National Patriotic Front of Liberia] soldiers went to fight in Sierra Leone until we came from Sierra Leone to pull Taylor from power.

(Human Rights Watch 2005: 15)

The other key question is who were those in command positions? Key individuals – such as Sam Bockarie (also known as 'Maskita' or Mosquito), Taco Ulai Delafosse (otherwise called Toulepleu), Alfonse Bron Said, and Isaac Checgbo (otherwise called Bob Marley) – are well-known figures in the Mano River War. The most famous of those fighters is certainly Bockarie – a Sierra Leonean – who lived in the Liberian capital, Monrovia, where he met some leaders from the RUF, and took the leadership of the movement after Sankoh was arrested. Bockarie also spent time in Côte d'Ivoire at the beginning of the war. He was spotted by the ICG in Côte d'Ivoire in March 2003, in Danané, in a '*maquis*' with Felix Doh (considered at the time as the junction between the Ivoirian rebels and the Liberian mercenaries). It was a few weeks before he allegedly killed Felix Doh and also a few weeks before he himself was killed at the border between Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. Other key individuals include: Oulai Anderson, aka Tako or 'Tarzan of the West' in Côte d'Ivoire, who has relatives in both Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire and fought in both countries; and 'Isaac Checgbo', a Liberian who fought in Côte d'Ivoire in 2003 and in 2011, where he established a camp in the city of Guiglo during the first month of the post-electoral crisis.

Social and kinship ties aligned fighters from one side of the border with fighters on the other side, something that was also facilitated by refugee flows (see Section 3.4). In Liberia, at the start of the war in 1989, Mandingos (many with family connections to neighbouring Guinea) were particularly targeted. As prominent traders and wealthy business people, they were considered allies of the Doe government, which had enabled them to displace 'indigenous' populations, especially Manos and Gios in Nimba County, where the war started and which neighbours both Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. This made them particular targets for Taylor's NPFL, which at the beginning of the war comprised mostly anti-Doe Manos and Gios. The anti-Taylor United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO) comprised mainly ex-Krahn Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) soldiers and Mandingo refugees, supported and trained by Sierra Leone and Guinea. The group later split along ethnic lines, the Krahn-dominated ULIMO-J under Roosevelt Johnson, and the Mandingo-based ULIMO-K under Alhaji G.V. Kromah, which continued to receive substantial support from Guinea.

With regard to the second stage of the Liberian conflict (1999–2003), ethnic linkages also played a role in external support to anti-Taylor forces, from Guinea, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire. For instance, Silberfein and Conteh (2006) note that in addition to pre-existing links through trade and anti-Taylor orientation, many of the local anti-RUF militias were pulled into the LURD rebellion because of refugee flows and kinship ties. Ferme and Hoffman (2004) also note that CDF fighters who moved across borders tended to be combatants with family ties on both sides of the border, or those who had previously spent time in Liberia working and/or fighting with one of the factions in the earlier Liberian civil war:

Given the extensive networks of trade and migration (voluntary and forced) throughout the Mano River region, this amounted to a substantial number of young men who expressed some degree of personal connection to communities across the national borders – an identification underscored by ethnic and linguistic allegiances that do not map onto official state boundaries.
(Ferme and Hoffman 2004: 78)

3.2 Regional politics

Since ex-colonial powers only had interest in specific countries (see Section 2), this enabled powerful regional actors such as Libya, Burkina Faso and (to a certain extent, but in different ways) Nigeria to exploit opportunities for regional influence through their greater understanding of transnational dynamics. This was especially the case with the end of the Cold War, which opened up these opportunities.

Post-Cold War geopolitics in the region helps to explain the Mano River War's transnational dynamics. The role of Charles Taylor, Doe's former procurement chief, is clearly a key factor in the regional dimensions of this war. His personal trajectory is interesting in that it reflects several facets of the region's dynamics. He started his rebellion from Côte d'Ivoire, and his troops were mostly Libyan-trained, supplemented by mercenaries from Burkina Faso supplied by President Blaise Compaoré and by internationalist revolutionaries from Gambia and Sierra Leone (Ellis 1995: 167). This rebellion was made possible because the region lost part of its strategic importance to the West at the end of the Cold War. New actors became crucial for Liberia and Sierra Leone whereby states such as Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Libya played a crucial role behind the politics and conflicts in both countries. New, complex, regional political and security dynamics have been developing between these countries. In the early 1990s, the conflict dynamic was along the Liberian–Ivoirian border where fighting and looting on both sides was fomented between members of the respective Krahn and Guéré ethnic groups with their Gio and Yacouba neighbours (Allouche and Mohammed 2014).

Libya may have used the Liberian civil war to undermine US influence in Liberia, since the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had reportedly used Liberia as a base to attempt the overthrow of Gaddafi's regime. Burkina Faso's president, Blaise Compaoré (another Libyan protégé) provided foreign mercenaries and training bases for Taylor. Military supplies and manpower from Libya and Burkina Faso were transported by road through Côte d'Ivoire to Liberia. The links between West African countries and Libya date back to the 1970s and the development of the Ghana–Burkina Faso–Libya revolutionary triangle (Abdullah 1998: 215).

The role of Blaise Compaoré is also crucial to the regional dimensions of the conflict. The involvement of key regime figures – like Gilbert Diendéré, his former personal chief of staff who supervised many of the arms shipments to Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire, or Salif Diallo, Compaoré's long-term adviser who acknowledged the involvement of his country in the name of democracy (in 2001) – shows the active geostrategic interest of the regime in these conflicts. But many questions remain. Did Compaoré contribute to integrating the wars and transforming them into a regional conflict? If so, how? What were his motivations with

regard to his country when he sent 700 men to Liberia or when Ouagadougou airport became the hub of arms traffic between Eastern Europe and Sierra Leone? Was Compaoré in it only for the money and diamonds? What was his level of autonomy? Did he take decisions alone or was he working under the control of Gaddafi? How did Western countries let him go that far? And, in more recent years, what was the exact role of Burkinabè prime minister, Yacouba Ilassac Zida, during the war in Côte d'Ivoire?⁹

The significance of this transnational dynamic may also be seen in the sub-regional response to the conflict. The military turmoil in Liberia created fear and anxiety among other countries in the region, worried that the flow of refugees to neighbouring countries and the spread of revolutionary ideology could destabilise their countries. Spearheaded by Nigeria, ECOWAS decided for the first time to establish a Monitoring Group, ECOMOG, to address the conflict in Liberia. Their fears seemed to have been realised when the war spread to Sierra Leone and ECOMOG troops were soon dispatched there too. While the effectiveness of these troops may be considered mixed at best, the action did demonstrate the importance of adopting a regional approach to managing the conflict(s). For example, the United Nations Security Council later endorsed the deployment of ECOWAS and French troops to Côte d'Ivoire.

As Taylor consolidated power in Liberia, large swathes of neighbouring Sierra Leone fell to a Taylor-backed armed rebellion. RUF rebels, backed by Taylor's NPFL forces, invaded Sierra Leone from Liberia. The RUF was led by Foday Sankoh, another Libyan-trained revolutionary who had previously fought alongside Taylor. As the RUF consolidated control of the diamond-rich areas of Sierra Leone, a Taylor-backed armed insurgency also flared up in neighbouring Guinea. The armed hostilities were also concentrated in Guinea's diamond-rich areas. Liberia accused Guinea of backing rebels who had fought the Liberian government to a standstill in the north (Adebajo 2002b; Cleaver and Massey 2006; ICG 2002).

The Guinean government supported successive anti-Taylor groups in Liberia, including the Mandingo-dominated ULIMO faction under Alhaji G.V. Kromah (ULIMO-K) during the first Liberian war. And in the second Liberian war, the Guinean government supported LURD to such an extent that in 2000 and 2001, the war was also fought in Guinea's border regions (ICG 2002; Human Rights Watch 2005).

The war and regional solidarity were also famously used in Guinea by former president Lansana Conté in his 9 September 2000 speech, which accused Alpha Condé of providing support to Taylor. This speech was pronounced only three days before Condé was imprisoned.

Borders are also porous to ideas and political propaganda, reinforcing the integration of the Mano river conflicts. In Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI), Gbagbo's party, used the Liberian conflict as an argument for mobilising the Guéré ethnic group during the local and national elections that took place from the mid-1990s to the 2000 presidential elections. Local party officials presented themselves as opponents of Félix Houphouët-Boigny supporters, and as such, supporters of Samuel Doe and the Krahn and the Guéré.

This paved the way for the future and helped facilitate the recruitment and integration of Liberian mercenaries who fought with Gbagbo militias during the two wars in Côte d'Ivoire (2002 and 2011). FPI politicians like Alphonse Voho Sahi, the former minister of culture, organised those networks of fighters or FPI's local civil servants such as Oualai Delafosse, who allegedly fought in Liberia for Samuel Doe and who became '*sous-préfet*' of Toulepleu,

⁹ Rinaldo Depagne's contribution at the workshop.

one of the Ivoirian cities that borders Liberia. All those political leaders had a foot in both worlds – the Guéré community in Côte d'Ivoire and Krahn community in Liberia (UN Panel of Experts Liberia 2011).

Burkina Faso and Liberia then played an important role in the war in Côte d'Ivoire, with militant recruits taken from the border shared by Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire joining the Forces Nouvelles (FN) rebels in the north. The conflict was sparked by a military uprising in September 2002 by some 800 soldiers about to be decommissioned from the military. These were mainly soldiers from the north who joined the armed forces during the military transition led by General Robert Gueï, following the 1999 coup. They rapidly consolidated their control over the north, purportedly with support from Burkina Faso President Compaoré, who had also been hosting former soldiers that had lost favour during the Gueï junta.

FN were not the only group to draw support from ethnic ties with neighbouring countries during the Ivoirian conflict. During the initial uprising in September 2002, the government accused former president Gueï of being the ringleader and he was subsequently killed. Gueï's supporters also organised themselves against the Gbagbo regime, supported by Charles Taylor. During his tenure, Gueï, from the Yacouba ethnic group, had recruited fighters from neighbouring Liberia's Gio people – traditionally Taylor supporters – who were ethnic 'cousins' of the Yacouba (ICG 2003a, 2003b). In turn, Gbagbo, from the minority Bété ethnic group in the south west, extensively recruited Liberian former combatants from counties bordering south-western Côte d'Ivoire. Many were recruited from MODEL, which was enabled by Gbagbo to recruit among Liberian refugees in their fight against Taylor, and who also helped to combat the Ivoirian rebels. These fighters were perceived as being mostly from the Krahn ethnic group (traditional opponents of Taylor), with whose ethnic cousins Gbagbo (a Guéré) was aligned. This dynamic continued during the most recent outbreak of conflict in Côte d'Ivoire (ICG 2011).

3.3 A crisis of youth

Before the war, social relations in each of the countries were governed by social norms that typically excluded youth from power structures and patronage networks. Richards (2005) argues that the conflicts in both Liberia and Sierra Leone are attributable to grievances arising from social exclusion made ripe for militia recruitment. For instance, in Sierra Leone, elders traditionally controlled young men's ability to acquire land and marry (Richards 1996, 2005). Many youth now reject these structures and are not integrated into traditional community structures. While the grievances debate focuses on rural inequalities, other scholars have shown that there was also an urban crisis, leading them to emphasise a general crisis of youth (Peters 2011). Youth experiences of marginalisation and brutalisation in urban slums or in diamond areas, at the hands of a distanced and patronising elite or traditional chiefs respectively, may in some respects reflect the Mano River War as generational. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, there remains today a very strong generational gap, even at the top of the political elite. The old generation is still in control of a political life that is organised around three senior figures who have been competing for power for 22 years – Bédié, Ouattara and Gbagbo.

Utas (2003) elaborates on alienation in Liberia resulting from a combination of racialised ethnic categorisation, poverty, unemployment, economic exploitation, and marginalisation, which have all blocked paths to adult futures. In this context, he notes that although forced recruitment occurred, many youth volunteered to fight; his central argument is that 'the marginalisation of young people' and their 'experience of abjection' (Utas 2003: 9) was a main driver for their participation in armed conflict. He further points to the socialising violence that young people are exposed to in Liberia, which facilitates the choice of violent paths by many young Liberians.

In the MRB war-affected countries, many youth also continue to encounter difficulties reintegrating into their communities and securing livelihoods, due to limited education and opportunities to acquire skills – often as a direct result of the civil crises. The Joint Vision for Sierra Leone of the United Nations' Family (2009–2012) describes how youth remain marginalised, with more than 60 per cent unemployed. Many young people are also excluded from education. A recent study undertaken in Sierra Leone showed that young people believed that the leading cause of secondary school dropouts was poverty (Chipika 2012). Many young people simply could not afford to stay in education because of the cost of books, transport, uniforms and school fees. The study also cited several 'hidden fees' such as teachers charging for additional lessons or marking assignments, and fees for retaking examinations if students failed the first time.

A certain segment of the youth population is recognised as constituting a major challenge to Sierra Leone's long-term security (Allouche 2013). They are considered problematic because the lack of opportunities to engage in productive economic life, as well as a lack of channels and forums through which to voice their concerns and interests, creates frustration and anger, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation towards political violence, social unrest, and criminal behaviour (Enria 2015). Uneducated youth in conditions of abject poverty and without any economic prospects have been shown to be susceptible to manipulation by influential people bent on causing chaos, as in the 2002 and 2007 election violence (Drew and Ramsbotham 2012; Shepler 2010; Africa Research Institute 2011; Srivastava and Larizza 2011). In 2009, the UN Secretary-General said that unemployment remained the most severe concern in Sierra Leone's post-conflict stability, and that urgent action was needed to create employment opportunities to reduce 'the lingering effects of the marginalisation of the country's young people who constitute the largest segment of the population' (UNIPSIL 2009: 3). With the influx of illicit drugs from South America into West Africa – specifically cocaine to Guinea-Bissau – the UN advocated an 'unorthodox' strategy, such as spending on major infrastructure projects to provide large-scale employment to disaffected youth.

Overall – and despite much of the rhetoric by the international community, the government and political parties in terms of youth marginalisation – discourses and policies are not matched with funding. Ahead of the 2012 elections in Sierra Leone, a news story reported that funds earmarked to youth issues accounted for less than 2 per cent of the government's 2011 budget, despite many discussions on youth issues from candidates (Oatley and Thapa 2012). On the UN side, while the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) and the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) have provided US\$34.5m for 19 projects in Sierra Leone, projects linked to the fourth PBF priority – youth empowerment and employment – account for just 5 per cent of the portfolio.

3.4 Refugees

In other regional conflict systems, recruitment of refugees is well documented. This includes the establishment of military training bases adjacent to refugee camps from 1994 to 1996 during the Rwandan crisis (Lischer 2005). In the MRB, movement of refugee populations can also explain how these conflicts became so regionally integrated. In July 1989, dozens of Liberian refugees came back to the village of Goulaleu, after a few years in Abidjan. Most of them were Gios (related to the Ivoirian Yacouba) who had escaped Liberia after General Quiwonkpa's assassination. The role they played in the attack that started the Liberian war in December 1989 is still unknown, although the NPFL's initial entry through Nimba County was supported by anti-Doe Gios and Manos (Adebajo 2002b). Liberian refugees in Sierra Leone, including Krahn and Doe-affiliated former soldiers, were reconfigured as ULIMO, sponsored by both the Sierra Leonean and Guinean governments.

Concerns arising from the refugee crisis resulting from the Liberian conflict are indicated as one of the factors for ECOWAS' swift involvement in Liberia. The Standing Mediation Committee set up to address the conflict involved all three of Liberia's neighbours – Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire – as observers, given that they were most affected by the arrival of refugees fleeing the war (Francis *et al.* 2005).

As the conflicts progressed, rebel and civilian defence groups in both Sierra Leone and Liberia were recruited from refugee populations residing in Guinea. For instance, LURD recruited among both Liberian and Sierra Leonean anti-RUF refugees in border areas with Guinea, supported by Guinea's government (ICG 2002; Cleaver and Massey 2006; Silberfein and Conteh 2006).

Refugees in Côte d'Ivoire were also targeted for rebel recruitment. After the toppling of the Doe regime in 1990, Krahn in Grand Gedeh also fled to Guéré areas of Moyen-Cavally for safety (Barriere and Gray 2012). In the 2000s, these were the target of recruitment by MODEL against Charles Taylor. Refugees were important because of their massive numbers – for instance, following the 2010–11 Ivoirian crisis, up to 250,000 Ivoirian refugees fled to neighbouring countries (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) 2013). Despite the fact that refugee camps were safe havens, they proved easy recruitment ground for new fighters. Because many of the refugees were not under the protection of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (even if this protection is sometimes very loose – see McGovern 2011), they were sheltered by relatives – especially at the beginning of the war, as was also the case in Côte d'Ivoire. This brought the 'taste' of the war to the host families, and made people more receptive to propaganda from both sides when the war began in Côte d'Ivoire. Following the Ivoirian crisis, there have been persistent allegations of former militias residing in refugee camps. In February 2014, 14 Ivoirian refugees (living both in local communities and in little Wlebo refugee camp in Maryland County) were arrested in Liberia on suspicion of being recruited to fight in Côte d'Ivoire (Parley 2014).

4 The limits of the concept

Despite all of these arguments, the unified regional dimensions of the Mano River War are disputed. One critique is that just because the same men are often fighting in different wars across the region, this does not prove the existence of a unified conflict.¹⁰ Indeed, the particular histories and trajectories of each country have undoubtedly shaped their wars and the specific causes of the fighting. In each case, the war was ignited by different local and national factors, but the regional and transnational dynamics acted as a kind of kindling to enable the conflicts to be sustained and spread.¹¹ Another related point of debate is whether the MRB can be thought of as two different regions or as one. Indeed, there was substantial debate among participants at the IDS workshop, 'A New Peace', in June/July 2015, as to whether the war in Côte d'Ivoire could really be related to previous wars in the region.

The Mano River War is also associated with problematic categories and discourses, especially around failed states and youth. The notion that idle youth, particularly young men, are a threat to stability is etched into narratives about the MRB and the Mano River War. Kieran Mitton challenged this idea and argued that youth in the region might actually be seen as incredibly resilient and resourceful rather than inherently problematic (Mitton 2013). The problematic youth narrative is also challenged by recent works by Chelphi-den Hamer (2009), Denov (2010), McGovern (2011) and Peters (2011). Collectively, their research instead portrays combatants in a far more complex light, whereby they are both 'agents *and* victims' in the MRB conflicts. This goes against the stereotype that youth participants in the civil wars were either 'socially unconstrained agent[s] of violence and abuse' or 'hapless victim[s] subjected to fighting as a result of larger political processes beyond his/her control' (Speight 2012: 309).

This Janus-faced identity also emerged during the workshop. For example, participants challenged several prevailing ideas about identity claims, particularly that of who counts as a 'combatant'. The basis of recruitment plays a large role in shaping these identity claims.¹² For example, Liberia differs from Sierra Leone because the NPFL held territorial dominance during the conflict, which resulted in fewer incidences of forced recruitment. How combatants were recruited still shapes the region today because it helped justify the atrocities that took place, with claims that if people were forced to fight, they might not necessarily be fully to blame for the atrocities they carried out. Chelphi-den Hamer's research also notes that recruits maintained ties to their communities and had not become combatants as a consequence of being cut off from them (Speight 2012: 314).

Gender dimensions are also missing from discussions about combatants. Mobility during the conflict, and perhaps also now, might be tied to security as well as livelihoods and attempts to establish economic independence.¹³ But mobility is gendered, with domesticity and stability considered feminine realms, while frontline positions were masculinised; even if there were a few female fighters, there were not enough to subvert this perception.

Meanwhile, a statist ideology has characterised war in Côte d'Ivoire, and might even provide an example of a popular reimagining of the state.¹⁴ This thesis challenges Hoffman's (2011) hypothesis that illegality is also part of the nature of the state in the region. During the workshop, Hellweg noted that rebels in fact mimicked aspects of the state, paying salaries to individuals in an arrangement that bore striking similarities to a state civil service. These salaries offered some permanence to fighters, as well as financial capital and political power.

¹⁰ Funmi Olonisakin's contribution at the workshop.

¹¹ Lisa Denney's contribution at the workshop.

¹² Zoe Marks' contribution at the workshop.

¹³ Zoe Marks' contribution at the workshop.

¹⁴ Joseph Hellweg's contribution at the workshop.

5 Conclusion

The last question to address is this: if the Mano River War has ended, can we really say that the syndrome of the conflict has ended? Or in other words, what are the possibilities of seeing one of these conflicts resume in the coming years? Although this is, of course, impossible to predict, many lingering elements that were once part of the conflict remain unresolved. Also, there are some important new transnational dynamics that continue to affect the region.

There are enduring issues, related to a flourishing illicit trade in drugs,¹⁵ arms and people (Marc *et al.* 2015: 20–22). All of this is facilitated by the lack of government presence and interest in border regions, and exacerbated by the fact that a generation of young people brought up during conflict continue to have limited prospects in the post-conflict environment, especially in peripheral border areas. There is also an extensive sense of injustice, especially the perception of a victor's justice, which generally refers to the fact that only individuals like Gbagbo and Taylor were ever put on trial, while many other people responsible for violence were never brought to justice. Furthermore, there is also a marked difference between the leaders that dominated West African politics in the 1980s and 1990s (single party, long-term, personality cult types) and the current generation. For example, many of the current leaders face domestic opposition and have less of a long-term 'kinship' approach to neighbouring countries. These are all major factors contributing to political instability in the region.

Having said this, times are different and the West African crisis appears to have moved from the Mano River to the Sahel, especially given the Malian crisis and Boko Haram insurgency and an uncertain future for Niger. Nevertheless, the considerations above could provide some insights into analysing these crises and approaches for bringing them to an end. This is already happening to some extent – for instance, the importance of considering the Boko Haram insurgency as a specific regional conflict is reflected in the creation of the regional Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which was set up to combat the group's multi-pronged campaign of terror. Another iteration could be through the adoption of a similar approach to address the increase in terrorist activities, as evidenced by the recent attacks in Mali and Burkina Faso.

This report also argues that the MRB's present dynamics are embedded in a number of historical factors. These include the competing legacies of state formation, identity claims, and the literature's consistent analytical focus on centrifugal politics. In turn, this analysis provides scope for some critique (and potential advancement) of the notion of a 'conflict system' such as the MRB. Indeed, the idea of a conflict system is not new to many conflict specialists, as there are similar dynamics found in other parts of the continent, such as the Sudans, the Great Lakes and Somalia. But rather than the obvious assertion that the conflicts in the MRB are interconnected, this Evidence Report suggests that revisiting the notion of a conflict system is crucial. This is, in part, because this frame might help local actors, governments and conflict managers in the region ensure the sustainability of peace and security by casting a more informative lens on events.

Another reason to advance an understanding of the MRB as a conflict system is that it may yield vital insights into the power of borderlands and how public authority and state formation can be constituted at the margins. For example, the broader borderlands literature suggests that borders, such as the MRB, are areas where local populations 'evade, resist or co-opt some sort of stateness in lived local realities' (Schomerus, de Vries and Vaughan 2013).

¹⁵ The scale of drug trafficking became apparent between 2005 and 2007, during which time more than 20 shipments were seized involving thousands of kilogrammes of cocaine from South America destined for Europe (UNODC 2013: 9).

This might partly be a response to a dynamic in which borders can become a stage for states to project their authority – at times violently – onto the populations in these areas.

The literature also suggests that borders such as the MRB might serve as an area for competition between ‘rival state elites’ in each of the countries in the region. As this report has shown, this competition can be exercised through displays of stateness, such as border controls and *préfets*. This is despite the reality that all of the MRB countries have historically had limited *de facto* control over their borders, even prior to the advent of Western colonisation. This all serves to shed new light on state–society ties and state-formation dynamics in MRB countries and potentially also other African states. In the instance of the Mano River War(s), to some extent the conflict could be the consequence of how the communities in the region have alternately been constrained by, and exploited, these competing borderland dynamics.

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